

KANEM-BORNU: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND · 19

mans and ruled it after World War I as a League of Nations Trust Territory, (later a U.N. Trust Territory) which meant in practice that it was part of the administrative responsibility of the colonial officials in Northern Nigeria. To appreciate more clearly what changes were brought about by colonialism, however, it is necessary to understand something of the social, economic, and in particular the political structure of Bornu, as it developed during pre-colonial times, and it is to this task that the remainder of the chapter is devoted.

~~Kanem~~ Bornu: The Social and Political Background

Only the sketchiest oddments of information are available about the nature of Kanem society. One Arabic record speaks of its capital as a city of tents, and tradition tells of a "Council of Nobles" that had a great deal of power over decision-making by the king, or Mai as he was called. From this and a few other data, such as the emphasis placed on the clan membership of persons mentioned in the early periods of the dynastic lists, we can attempt a reconstruction that fits the facts. The early kingdom seems to have been made up of patrilineal, named clans under senior or noble lineages (also named) whose heads formed the so-called "Council of Nobles" under the king or Mai. The Mai himself was head of the senior lineage of a senior clan considered to be the most important or powerful in the region. In all probability the term "Mai" or "king" was used for all leaders of clans just as it is today among some of the nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples of the Sahara to the north of Lake Chad who are closely related to the Kanuri. It also appears that the great Kanuri king lists are just what local people say they are—lists of the leaders of the Magumi Sefuwa or Sefuwa lineage heads of the Magumi clan. People in the clan considered themselves related by ties of descent to a common ancestor; but they could not describe the exact link with him, while they could describe the genealogical ties through men that made them all Sefuwa. Very probably these people utilized both cattle and domesticated plants although their early city of tents, referred to by Arabic historians, also suggests a greater emphasis on nomadism and the use of cattle. This is consistent with the clan organization described above; indeed this form of organization is widespread among nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples in the Sahara, North Africa, the Horn of Africa, and Arabia. Later, as attested by the ruins at Garamoulé northwest of Lake Chad they probably built more permanent settlements and very likely used slaves from the south of Lake Chad as trade goods and as agricultural laborers.

How centralized and developed the early stages of the Kanem state really were is an intriguing and difficult question and one that can be solved only by extensive historical and archaeological research. Certainly concepts of statecraft from Islamic areas to the north of the desert and trips by Kanem monarchs to Mecca would have acquainted the rulers with the ideas of very highly centralized states. How much this actually affected Bornu is unknown, although it is possible that tensions over the power of the central monarch were another reason for the civil strife which led eventually to the migration of the Sefuwa from Kanem to Bornu.

After the Sefuwa set up their kingdom in Bornu the state became a much more highly organized and centrally controlled political system. The people who

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THE KINSHIP SYSTEM · 35

These rules of inheritance are followed very closely in practice, because everyone knows that any dispute over inheritance that cannot be settled amicably between the surviving relatives goes to court—and the court normally takes ten percent of the estate for its adjudication services in an inheritance dispute. When a man is called into the courts, and most Kanuri have been to court at some time in their lives, he must go with his agnates—his father, paternal grandfather, father's brothers, sons, father's brother's sons, and any other male he can muster who is related to him in the male line. This agnatically related group is legally responsible as a whole for the acts of each of its members unless a crime against the state has been committed. A Kanuri who is threatened immediately thinks of this group as the one that he can turn to for help. As we shall see later the group often lives close together so that the agnates are neighbors as well as a corporate group in the eyes of the law. They help one another in many day-to-day activities, perform ceremonies together, and often practice the same or closely related occupations.

Although there is an emphasis on a person's agnates, his kin relations through his mother are also quite important. People who have no matrilineal kin (those related to a person through the mother), or very few of them, are considered to be unfortunate because they lack that much warmth and affection in their lives. These kin, say the Kanuri, love you like a mother loves her child. You can feel at home with them in a way that is less conflict-ridden than any other kinship relation. People often said that if they had to borrow money it was better to go to mother's kin first before asking anyone related to them agnatically. There is always some tension over property among an agnatic descent group because it is the major one for purposes of inheritance, family wealth, and privileges. People say that if a man borrows from his father or his father's brothers, or his brothers, or his patrilineal cousin, he is trying to get his inheritance or that of his brothers before the proper time. Furthermore, the responsibility in court, and in the eyes of public opinion, of one agnate for another also increases the tensions in this group as compared to the matrilineal one. By contrast, however, a man with no agnates is not just unfortunate—he is a social outcast. He has no group to stand up for him as a result of his birth into society; he has no legal right to a father's inheritance, he is thought of as an outcast, he must rely solely on his wits, and he cannot easily be trusted.

A village area chief and his advisers declared that I should not hire a certain man and claimed that they were going to see to it that I certainly did not take him into my household. They told me that no one in the vicinity knew his brothers or his father, or his father's brothers, or indeed if he had any, or where they might be, and he would not volunteer any information on the subject. In their eyes he was not a responsible person, and if he did anything wrong there was no group they could call into account for it. Unless he could attach himself to a household, he simply had no means of achieving an accepted position in the community, and the village leaders did not like the idea of making me, a European stranger, responsible for this unknown man.¹ Obviously under such circumstances illegitimate

¹ This would mean that as his household head I must appear in court if and when he did something wrong. The local leaders did not believe they could require this responsibility from me, and were thus faced with the problem of allowing into their community a man for whom no one could vouch, yet giving him a paid place in one of its wealthiest households.

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• 613 children are abhorred and every effort is made to get the woman married should she be pregnant. Although her shame is great, it is nothing compared to the problems that the new individual will encounter unless people come to accept his mother's agnatic kin group as his—and whether that group will in fact accept him as a member. The pariah status of illegitimate children is easily seen in the widespread belief that they can only marry others like themselves or people of slave status.

59 So much then for the first two features of kinship, those of genealogy and descent. The third aspect, that of marriage relations, brings us much closer to what is commonly thought of as family life in western society. Using the anthropological jargon, we can sum up the kinds of relations invoked by a Kanuri marriage by saying that Kanuri marriage is polygynous with virilocal residence patterns which have a patrilocal emphasis and an exceptionally high divorce rate. In plain English this means that the men can marry more than one wife, up to four by Islamic law (they are polygynous); the wife invariably leaves her home to go and live with her husband in a place chosen by him (they are virilocal); and, this often but not always proves to be in the vicinity of, or even inside, the household of the husband's father (there is a tendency toward patrilocality). Finally, most Kanuri marriages, the vast majority of them certainly, end in divorce.

[586] Because a marriage usually involves the creation of whole sets of kinship links where none existed before, the way in which such changes are brought about and made "official," or publically recognized, is an important aspect in the anthropological study of marriage. Furthermore, such activities are also very important moments in the lives of the individuals concerned, who must see to it that all that should be done is done correctly according to traditional custom. Thus we start looking at marriage by describing its inception.

581 In thinking about a marriage the first question that any Kanuri man asks himself is whether he can afford it or not. That is, can he and those people on whom he can count for financial aid take on the expense of a marriage ceremony and bridewealth payments; and, if he can, how high can he go?

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595 A man who already has a wife or wives knows that he must give gifts, supposedly equal to those going to the bride, to wives already married to him. He knows that the pressures for expenditures for drummers, food, transportation of the bride to his dwelling, and many other aspects of the ceremony, will very likely involve more of an outlay than he can readily predict. Can the capital be raised for such an undertaking? Most men are helped by their friends, their kin, and their political and economic patrons if they have any. Kanuri recognize the outcome of marriage expenses in their oft-quoted saying, "A man who is not in debt over a wedding is a man who has no friends."

583 Bridewealth payments form the basic marriage expense, and they can vary in size and elaborateness depending upon the status of the two family groups who are joined through the marriage, the marital history of the girl, the previous relationship of the groom to the girl's family, the bargaining power of each party to the marriage arrangement, and the time of year during which the payments are to be made. Although other factors can enter in and pull the bridewealth up or down in individual cases, these are the most effective determinants of bridewealth.

The payments themselves can be divided into three general categories, plus a "rebate." First there are one or more small gifts given to the girl and her rela-

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at different times, or may have become assimilated to Kanuri culture. A shatter-belt of small tribes, part-pagan and part-Moslem, and strongly influenced by Kanuri culture, rings Bornu Emirate. (These have been described in Chapter 1.) North of Bornu are the Kanembu, closely related culturally and linguistically to the Kanuri, and with an inter-twined history that goes back to the Empire of Kanem, which preceded the Empire of Bornu.

[614] The Kanembu and the Kanuri share another set of jilis--which appear to be the remnants of patrilineal kin groups, or patrisibs.

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The word jili will here be used in a very restricted sense to refer to the sib. Informants with an interest in the history of Bornu and with a strong historic sense relate that the jilis were no longer functioning in the days when Shehu Laminu ruled at Kukawa. Kanuri, Kanembu and all the sub-groups of Kanuri (Kwoyam, Mobber, Manga etc.) were sub-divided into jilis with

[304] the same names cross-cutting them. A child was of the same jili as his father, and each jili had its distinctive facial scars by which its members could immediately be identified. The jili was not endogamous. Each jili had its common ancestor, whose name is known for every jili; each jili had as its head

[651] someone appointed by the Mai, or king. The primary function of the jili head was to collect taxes (haraji) from the people of

[643] his jili. The Mails of old were of the jili Magumi, the royal

[643] sib, and of the sub-jili Sef. All individuals of the sub-jili Sef are descended from Sef Isami who is reputed to have come

173 from Yemen, consequently the dynasty of the Mals of Bornu is re-
 614 ferred to as the Sef dynasty. There are twelve such sub-jilis
 • 613 within the jili Magumi. If within the sub-jili Sef a man should
 arise to great power and importance, his future descendants
 would refer to him as the ancestor of their sub-sub-jili (line-
 age) of the sub-jili Sef. One informant, who is Kanembu (but
 culturally Kanuri), gave the following pedigree: Kanembu, jili
 Kuvuri, sub-jili Kongana, sub-sub-jili Malam Shia. Malam Shia
 was an important historic personage who is considered to be the
 founder of the lineage which bears his name.

173 The Sef dynasty came to an end after the Fulani invasions,
 643 and Shehu Laminu established the line of the present Shehus
 614 though he himself never ruled as king. Shehu Laminu was Kan-
 embu, of the jili Kuvuri. He was followed into Bornu by a num-
 ber of Kanembu and Shuwa nobles, with their retinue, who assisted
 [178] him in driving back the Fulani. Shehu Laminu was instrumental
 in further reducing the role of the jilis by appointing a Shetima
Kanuribe (Shetima is a noble title) as head of all the Kanuri,
 replacing the various heads of the jilis; he did the same for
 the Shuwas under him.

614 Today everyone knows his own jili, and the jili of his par-
 178 ents, which may and usually does differ, but the jili no longer
 performs any social function. Few people can give their sub-jili.

[643] Many of the jilis today have a nominal head. The present Shehu
 is obviously head of all the Kanembu Kuvuri. The head of the
 Kanuri Magumi is the former Waziri Ibrahim. The Shetima Kanuribe

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origin story, often associating the founder with the Prophet. For example, the following story was related by an informant about the origins of the tira clan:

One day a barber was shaving the Prophet's head. The man made a mistake and cut the Prophet's scalp. Blood came out and the barber drank it. Everyone who comes from that barber is tira. They are not connected with chiefs, they are common people but they are close to the Prophet -- they are sherib, fire will not burn them.

Some informants felt that in the old days there may have been a tendency for clan endogamy, not as a sanctioned custom, but as a matter of mere frequency. No one ever heard of any exogamous rules, or ever connected the clans to any natural species of flora and fauna.

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Among some of the high status groups and some of the very high status families of Bornu, not only clan membership is known but also a series of maximal lineages within the clan to which the name of an original founder (not mythical as in the case of the clan) is attached. Most Kanuri have heard of the Sefuwa lineage of the Magumi clan. This was the royal lineage of pre-nineteenth century Bornu. No rules of marriage were elicited for this grouping.

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Questions about clan to younger Kanuri and even older ones in some cases often brought out (after tribal affiliation) residential associations. Thus, a peasant informant would relate how his daughter had been married to a man whose clan was Kanuri. Continued questioning on the same point would bring out the reply that the son-in-law's sub-clan was Maiduguri; in other words, the name of his town.

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On the basis of this data, it is concluded that Kanuri clans and maximal lineages have very little, if any, functioning significance in the contemporary society.

888 economic security for many men who are unable to achieve the more
592 highly valued position of respected senior member of a compound in
183 their old age.

Inheritance

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The rules followed in inheritance are those of Maliki law, and these are codified rules upheld in the courts when succession cases

• [613] are heard. In general property should remain within the agnatic lineage with preference given to seniority or linearity and male sex. The surviving male always receives two parts to every one given to the surviving female of equal relationship to the deceased. A wife is considered when a man has no children. She and her co-wives (if present) are entitled to one-third of the warata (inheritance) of her (their) dead husband, while the remaining two-thirds goes to the agnatic group. Thus, if a man has four wives and no children each is entitled to a fourth of the wife's third, i.e. one-twelfth of the estate. For wives this means in practice only a share of the movables, excluding land-use rights and the household immovables. If there are children a wife is not entitled by law to any of the inheritance, although it is customary to give her a gift of money if she is being

[587] sent away from her dead husband's house by the surviving agnates. If none of the male children are her own then she has no longer any living connection with her husband's family unless she marries a brother, which is known but not practised. When a son is very young the closest brothers of the deceased, in order of seniority, get the largest portion of the inheritance and act as father to the surviving children. If a senior brother of the deceased survives him he must

(1) See Ruxton F.R., Maliki Law, 1916 (London).

428 of system is developed to order this common human problem. Because
571 it is perhaps one of the most fundamental determinants in directing
121 the course of continuity in the social process, it would be well to
understand clearly what are the implications and problems created in
the system of rules outlined above.

428 Two common kinds of conflicts arise from the Kanuri in-
578 heritance system: a minor and perhaps even invigorating one, and a
613 major and fundamental one which strikes at the unity of the agnatic
lineage. The first and minor conflict is that which arises between a
deceased's wife, supported by her agnates on the one side, and the
agnatic group of her dead husband on the other. She may claim that
some of the property of her dead husband really belongs to her, often
because she loaned him some of her property and he died before he
could give it back. In this type of dispute, the agnatic relations
of the deceased act corporately as defendant, while the widow and her
[571] agnates are a corporate plaintiff. The end result in terms of social
relations in this kind of conflict is to strengthen the agnatic lin-
eage structure of the society.

The second type of conflict can be expressed as a split
between collaterality, as represented by the agnatic siblings of
the deceased on the one hand, and linearity as represented by the
[692] father-son relationship on the other. This type of dispute which is
rarely seen in the courts occurs between a dead man's male siblings
and his sons, over the distribution of his property. By traditional
law the sons have more rights than their paternal uncles to their
father's inheritance, given that they are of age (which sometimes
becomes the basis of the argument). However, no clear cut either/or

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distinctions are made between these relatives as to the distribution of the rights and prerogatives of the deceased. The strength of the father-son relationship and its importance as the model for one of the central norms of behaviour in the society give it a much more important and decisive position for resolving conflicts in most cases. Although some internal resentments may result, the legal and social identity of the agnates with one another for the most part override this conflict in the system.

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tions are within larger organizations. However, this comparison suggests that to young western educated Kanuri there is very little choice to make between whether or not they would work as an independent entrepreneur, or within some larger organization.

Birth Description

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Although Kanuri society is, and always has been, a fluid one in which people could (within limits) move up and down the status hierarchy, rank is also judged in terms of an individual's birth into a par-

- [613] ticular bilateral family. Because of the greater importance of the agnatic group, its status in the society determines to a much larger degree than any other what birth status is accorded to the person.

- [428] Several factors, fixed and variable, add to or subtract from the birth status. A fixed factor is the individual's birth order. The eldest son (naji) has a higher status than his brothers for it is known that he is heir to his father's compound and thus to much of his social position. However, this can vary. If the father is very old and his children very young, then a brother of the father will be regarded as the logical heir to the compound as its authoritative head, thus lowering the effect of his young nephew's naji status.

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- [123] Despite birth order and the inheritance factors affecting it, one of the first questions asked about a stranger entering a community is, "who is his father?". The political leaders of Magumeri refused to allow the writer to hire a "wandering minstrel" as a water boy during the first few weeks of the field trip because, as they said, "no one knows who his father is." That is to say, his original place in the social organization, his legal unity with an agnatic group which would answer for him and make him a responsible person, was unknown. Thus he